THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

When We Talk About God

John M. Buchanan

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Whether or not they believe in God, whether or not they find God an attractive notion, most people have an idea of God, an idea that tends to center on power. God is all-powerful, omnipotent, God is in charge of everything. God is like a king, and one who rules as an absolute monarch. God is like a father, and a patriarchal, domineering father at that . . .The Christian gospel, however, starts its understanding of God from a very different place. To read the biblical narratives is to encounter a God who is, first of all, love. Love involves a willingness to put oneself at risk, and God is in fact vulnerable in love, vulnerable even to great suffering.

William C. Placher
Narratives of a Vulnerable God

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WHEN WE TALK ABOUT GOD
JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
May 21, 2000

John 15: 1-8; 1 John 4: 7-21 (NRSV)

"God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them." (1 John 4:16)

Startle us, O God, with your truth. Open our hearts and minds to your word. Open our spirits to your love, revealed in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

The Good Friday edition of *The Wall Street Journal* contained a feature article that caught my eye: "Redefining God." As a veteran of the Re-Imaging battles in the Presbyterian Church, I get a little nervous anytime anyone starts to Re-Imagine or Re-Define anything, particularly God. "Redefining God: An old bearded man or a force in the wind?" the headline asked.
The Journal reporter, Lisa Miller, began her article with a Presbyterian Church in New York where the minister addresses God in prayer: "O burning mountain, O chosen sun, O perfect moon," and reports that while " a steady 90% of Americans continue to say they believe in God, the number of those who say no standard definition comes close to their notion of the deity, has more than doubled in the past 20 years."

Authoritarian paternal language doesn't work for many people any more. "Even traditionalists envision a God who is more accessible, more 'down here' than the old bearded man in the sky who has long dominated western religion."

The Journal conducted its own survey—"When We Talk About God," from which I borrowed as a title for this sermon.

- **Chad Curtis, a baseball player calls God "my creator."**
- **Robert Dilenschneider, a P.R. executive sees God with a white robe and a red cloak and a halo on his head,**
- **Danny Goldberg, CEO of Artemis Records talks about God in terms of intense feelings of love,**
- **Popular Dallas preacher, Bishop T. D. Jakes says, "I don't need to see Him to believe Him. I don't see heat, but I know it's hot."**
- **Anne Lamott, author— "In the buds of the apricot tree. Or a baby. Or the California poppies"**
- **And Dana Buchman, a fashion designer who claims to be a Presbyterian and says, "I don't believe in God, but I think often of close relatives who've had an influence on my life and values. It's like ancestor worship."**

When we talk about God, the words we use are important and in the West, at least, the words we use have to do with power and authority and potency and omnipotence.

Sallie McFague, who teaches theology at Vanderbilt University, has written a book about the power of words. She remembers that old childhood mantra: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me," and observes that it is really "lying bravado." "It is the

names that hurt. One would prefer sticks and stones." Names matter, she says, "because what we call something, how we name it, is to a great extent what it is to us."

In the first century, at the beginning of the Christian story, images and language about God came from two sources. The first was Hebrew religion—Judaism. The second was the political/social sphere—the Empire. Jesus was a Jew. All the earliest believers were Jews. The religion of Israel had such a high notion of God's mystery and transcendence that there was a law against depicting God in any artistic way. The problem with idols, statues and pictures and amulets in Judaism is that they don't ever do justice to their subject and result in a diminishment of the God they attempt to portray. The Jews understood that the same thing happens with language and so God's name is never spoken out loud and the scriptures don't even try to describe God in philosophical terms. The God of Israel is the creator, the liberator, the judge, the caring presence who will be in the valley of the shadow of death, the one who accompanies men and women on their life journey wherever they go, to the uttermost parts of the sea or the depths of hell—"even there thy right hand shall hold me." The God of Israel has a heart, cares for people, has compassion. That's a very different way of talking about God in the ancient world.

Ancient gods were capricious, vain, selfish and cruel, the purpose of religion was to persuade the gods to give a little protection, health, wealth, success. The gods were frightening. Israel talked about God's goodness and graciousness, God abounding in steadfast love, but that was not the language of secular society, the language of the Greco/Roman Empire.

Thomas Cahill writes about it in his recent book, *Desire of the Everlasting Hills, The World Before and After Jesus.* Cahill explains, the dominant image of deity in that world was raw and unlimited power defined most eloquently by the Roman Emperor. Octavian was his name. We remember him primarily because he makes a brief appearance in Luke's story of Jesus' birth. He was the one who consolidated the empire by brute force after the assassination of Julius Caesar and the suicides of Mark Anthony and Cleopatra. He was, the historians tell us, "an excellent administrator, cunning politician, difficult, delusional and cruel. Those who knew him hated and feared him." When he returned to Rome from victorious campaigns in Spain and Gaul, he took a new name, Augustus, "exalted one," and set up a statue of himself in the midst of the Roman Forum that was eleven times the size of a normal man and similar statues were erected in central shrines throughout the empire. "Augustus was not a normal man," Cahill reports. "He was a god, deserving worship. And like all gods, he was terrifying." (p.56)

And so as Christianity spread into that ancient world, it used a very different language to talk about God.

Our text this morning for instance—a few sentences from a letter written to a Christian community somewhere in Asia Minor near the end of the first century. The letter's primary purpose is not theology; rather it was addressed to a dispute—in this particular church. Church fights are not unique in our time, obviously.

People were not getting along with each other and although we don't know what exactly was wrong, it appears that they were angry about doctrine, about the nature of Jesus Christ, a topic about which we can still launch a fairly strenuous debate. The writer of the letter is a man named John. It can't be proven, of course, but one of our oldest and most precious traditions is that the Gospel of John and the three brief letters which bear the name were written by John, the apostle of Jesus, the beloved disciple.

He was, tradition has it, the youngest of the twelve—perhaps 20. So he's in his 80's now, perhaps the last of the original twelve to be alive. And he wants to make sure that the young church gets it right.

The fight is about words, ideas, concepts, language about God, essentially. One group in that community was saying that language is what really matters. They were called Gnostics—their position was that religious faith is essentially understanding and knowing and believing the right ideas about God. A faithful Christian is a person who knows something that other people do not know. If you don't get the words and concepts and doctrines and language right, you're not really a Christian. Sound familiar? Some folk are still fussing about the fact that a group of women in a conference in Minneapolis a few years ago set out to re-imagine God, Church and society, and came up with some new words and concepts and images. Some folk think that if you don't use the correct words to describe Jesus Christ and your personal religious experience, you can't be a Christian.

I imagine old John, in his 80's, with his head in his hands, his brow furrowed, late at night, remembering how it was sixty years before when he sat beside Jesus and listened to him talk, and walked with him on the road, how it was the night Jesus washed their feet, and broke bread and poured the cup, the night he said, "I am the vine and you are the branches . . .As the father has loved me, so I have loved you: abide in my love."

I imagine old John, late at night, in the twilight of his own life, remembering and then in an instant of energy and determination and passion, getting out a scroll and pen and scribbling furiously: "Beloved, let us love another, because love is from God: everyone who loves is born of God and knows God."

And then: "Whoever does not love does not love God, for God is love."

Not—God is power. Not—God is might. Not—God is a judge. God is love.

What a radical, provocative thing to say—what a new way to think about God.

It's not an abstraction, by the way. It's not love as an emotion, a philosophic platonic concept. It is love expressed in Jesus Christ.

"In this is love," old John wrote on, "not that we loved God (an abstraction) but that he loved us, and sent his son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins." So the love that God is is a compassionate, giving, self-sacrificing activity.

And then the "so what," the ethical imperative that would forever distinguish this new way of talking about God from every other way, this imperative which would be the glory of the church of Jesus Christ at times but also its shame—"Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another."

How do you know the reality of God? How do you come to an understanding? How, in evangelical language, do you know Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior? Here is the oldest answer of all—"God is love, and those who abide in love, abide in God, and God abides in them."

How to add depth to your spiritual life, integrity and authenticity to your religion? How to feel more in touch with God? The oldest answer of all is not "read another book" or "attend another

seminar" The oldest answer of all is start loving, start showing some of the reality of God by acts of self-giving, sacrificial love. "Those who abide in love, abide in God and God abides in them."

A group of young adults went to Honduras recently to build a few houses with Habitat for Humanity. They were an ecumenical bunch, church people mostly, the majority Presbyterians. They had each heard hundreds of sermons, attended hundreds of church services. They're smart so they've read books and probably sat through lectures and workshops and seminars and college classes on theology. And what they told me was that when they finished their work—hard work, digging and carrying blocks and mixing concrete—and dedicated the houses in a simple little ceremony and turned them over to the Honduran families who had been working with them, it was an important and powerful and authentic experience; "the one truly spiritual experience in my life."

"God is love and those who abide in love, abide in God, and God abides in them."

Thomas Cahill who wrote so helpfully about the time before and after Jesus and how Roman images of power and authority were the dominant theological concepts and how radical the Gospel of Jesus Christ sounded, this religion based on the idea that God is love and that religion is essentially living that love in the world—Cahill wrote on Easter Sunday in the New York Times a personal memoir, a kind of religious testimony which serves, I thought, as an eloquent illustration of his point and our text.

Cahill, it turns out, takes his religion seriously. He is a member of St. Malachy's Catholic Church in Manhattan and he and some others volunteer to read bed-time stories to children in Incarnation Children's Center, a foster home for children with AIDS. When they arrive at the home, they are greeted by the children like the celebrities emerging from their limos at the Academy Awards. Cahill's special child is Everett—four years old, who cannot speak words any longer, only make noises, because the disease has attacked his brain. He cannot walk, has no control of his body from the waist down and Cahill says knows what is happening to him.

Cahill describes a recent encounter. Everett was very sick, actually in the hospital, lying listlessly in his crib—a kind of metal cage. Cahill writes:

> **"He was so happy to see me . . . soon he was pointing sheepishly at his diaper to let me know that he needed to be changed. I know Everett well enough to know that such things can't be ignored. Since I couldn't even reach him in the locked metal cage, I went looking for a nurse.**
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> **I returned to tell Everett he would have to wait. Then the wailing began. He threw himself into the pillow and turning from me, bawled his heart out.**
>
> **What must it be like to be always at the mercy of others, even for the simplest things? I got my hand through the bars up to my forearm, but still I could not touch him. At last my fingers reached his. He did not draw away.**
>
> **And thus we stayed for a very long time, the tips of my fingers massaging the tips of his, the best I could do, while I said, over and over, 'It's all right, Everett. It's all right, my friend."**

The nurse arrived. The diaper was changed. Cahill sat down to read the book, *The Things that can be Seen in the Dark,* about a father taking his son on a night journey. Everett liked it a lot—it

was a pop-up book and his little hand emerged between the bars to pull the tabs that set off the special effects. Toward the end, he lay back, too tired to help with the tabs.

"When I left him, he was almost asleep, holding the suddenly enormous book to his fragile body."

And then Cahill, who has written so helpfully about Jesus and the early church and what a different way of thinking about God and about what it means to be human Christianity has fostered, reflects, "As I returned to the dismal street, there came to me unbidden this sentence from John's Gospel: 'Now there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother and his mother's sister . . .and Mary Magdalene."

That was, of course, the same John who in his old age wrote:

"Beloved, let us love one another . . . God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them."

Amen.